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# CIVIC ACTIVITIES OF WOMEN'S CLUBS

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## FOREWORD

By MRS. PERCY V. PENNYBACKER,

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Since *The Annals* is prophetic as well as historic, I desire my foreword to Mrs. Wood's stimulating account of "The Civic Activities of Women's Clubs" to forecast what I hope may be a leading feature of our work during the next two years.

As a country we are almost united upon the fact that the great question facing us is the betterment of rural life. The city problems may seem important, but they are in reality only a drop in the great ocean as compared with the problems that affect the millions of our people who dwell in rural communities. Someone has well said that reforms in a city are mere makeshifts, but that if we reach the masses in the country, we have gone above the rapids, and prevented the terrible destruction that comes from the cataract.

It is not enough for our rural people to *produce* more in the fruits of the field, they must have opportunity to *live* more. Especially is this true of the boys and girls, the young men and the young women; their lives must be fuller and richer or the country cannot hold them when the city beckons.

We have had shown at our various fairs and expositions the model community that should exist near every rural school. There is the church with the minister's house hard by, the store, the doctor's home and office, and the school building which is to be used as a social center. Now if this school is to be a success, if this school is to be a real center of the best social life in the community, it must be presided over by a teacher who has at least some degree of permanency. Nothing will sooner give this permanency than a comfortable house, with a plot of ground, where the teacher can have a settled feeling. Even if an unmarried woman she can generally form a home for herself and the visiting nurse, which nurse the community needs solely. Not ten per cent of our people realize the sacrifices made and the difficulties endured by the country school teacher. If we could see the physical discomforts, the poor food, the lack of privacy, the ill-ventilated bedroom, the long walk, the absence of janitor service; in fact, oftentimes, the lack of everything to make life sweeter, easier and healthier, we would wonder that any group of men and women could be found to endure such privations in return for the pittance doled out to them in the way of salaries. The day will come when a poet will rise to sing the virtues and unselfish service of the country teacher.

If the million women in the General Federation would concentrate for the next two years in an effort to bring about a model settlement and especially to establish teachers' homes—school manses—in connection with at least one school building in each county, they would be serving the entire nation.

About four years ago a certain man, high up in America's civic councils, in speaking of the woman's club movement, remarked, "It is one of the greatest, if not indeed the greatest, of the civic forces of modern times," and today that statement would be challenged only by one who either, being blind, has not seen the nationwide civic awakening or, being obtuse, has refused to attribute this awakening to its proper sources.

The club movement was begun nearly fifty years ago as a cultural movement and, as such, was criticized, ridiculed or encouraged according to the state of mind or powers of observation of the critic. It soon became evident, even to the most ardent advocate of the cultural movement, that the service which the club women were to render to humanity was not wholly of a cultural character. Very early the club women became unwilling to discuss Dante and Browning over the teacups, at a meeting of their peers in some lady's drawing room, while unsightly heaps of rubbish flanked the paths over which they had passed in their journeys thither. They began to realize that the one calling in which they were, as a body, proficient, that of housekeeping and homemaking, had its outdoor as well as its indoor application. They soon learned that art, in its best and highest sense, was a thing, not of galleries and museums alone, but that it was a thing of practical, every day life and that, wherever there were cleanliness and symmetry and beauty, there was art in its best and highest sense. They learned that well kept lawns were but the outer setting of well kept houses, and that back yards and back alleys had their places in the great science of home making; they learned that tenement house and factory conditions were but phases of the daily lives of other women; and that juvenile courts and playgrounds and eleemosynary institutions were determining factors in the character of many another woman's child.

It was this knowledge, the extension of the home making instinct of women and the broadening out of the mother instinct of women, that led them out into paths of civic usefulness.

In the meantime, while individuals and individual clubs were learning their duty to their community life, the General Federation

of Women's Clubs was growing to great dimensions until, today, a rough although not exaggerated estimate of the membership, direct, indirect and allied, places the number of women in that organization well beyond a million and a half. A million and a half of women in America, turning their attention toward the betterment of existing conditions, can scarcely be disregarded, the mere fact of numbers alone forcing us to recognize this force as one of the greatest factors in the entire network of civic advancement of America. But this is not a question of members alone: it is a question of determined action and great actual results. There is no loud-sounding slogan; no great creed of many words. It is simply an unchartered but highly contagious epidemic of civic righteousness which has laid hold of the women of America, these wives and mothers who are coming to interpret their duty to their own families in a language which shall be known and read by all mankind. If the club women of America have a slogan, it is "Service;" this one word is at once their slogan, their creed, and their ultimate goal.

No single address or magazine article can do justice to the civic activities of the club women; it is a story in which each community has its chapter, for these activities reach from the lecture course of the small club in the rural community to the many-sided work of the great departmental club whose work is interwoven into every good deed which the great city knows.

Thousands of towns, cities and hamlets can bear testimony to the work of these organized women: there are more sanitary and better ventilated schoolhouses; there are more numerous parks and more cleanly streets; there are district nurses who visit the sick poor in their homes and give instruction in the simple rules of wholesome living; there are sanitary drinking fountains for man and beast; there are vacation schools and playgrounds; there are juvenile courts and equal guardianship laws; there are cleaner markets; there are many free public libraries and thousands of traveling libraries; there is a lessening of objectionable bill-board ornamentation; there is a determined campaign, nation-wide, against the housefly; there is a more intelligent knowledge of the prevention and care of tuberculosis; in short, there is scarcely any movement for the betterment of living conditions or for the social and moral uplift of the American people that has not received a helping hand from the club woman. It is not fair to note examples,

for each single instance might be duplicated a thousand times; nevertheless a few examples may serve to bring these activities in a concrete form before the reader.

In a little town in Iowa the women, who came in occasionally from the farms to do a little shopping, had no place other than the store counter or street corner where they might wait while horses were shod, corn ground, and politics discussed, determined to improve conditions. They organized with committees on: streets and alleys, main street and railroad stations, public health, municipal business, membership and entertainment. One hundred and seven women in that little town joined the club during its initial month. They decided first upon an annual clean-up day: they were housekeepers, all of them, and cleaning house was an annual necessity to their code of morality and life. The committees got to work and streets were weeded; alleys were cleaned up; bonfires put sweepings and papers beyond danger of return; the depot, the loafing corners and the public places were cleared of tobacco juice and other offensive signs of the thoughtless, careless citizen; yards were raked; cans, garbage and brush carted beyond the town limits; ordinances were passed prohibiting offensive practices, and posters were put in all public places; two cement troughs furnished to thirsty and tired animals water where none had been before; the river banks were cleared of brush and sign boards; and finally a four-room cottage was purchased, moved to a central lot, mounted on a cement foundation, ornamented with a cement porch, painted and papered free of charge by the willing hands of the women themselves, furnished by donations of every kind known to the comfortable home, from tea towels to rocking chairs, and the little house became a social center for all kinds of meetings; lectures, private parties, rest rooms—even the city council holds its meetings now in the woman's building. Finally came the library, beginning with one hundred volumes; and this civic club, having been in existence but six years, has well nigh revolutionized one small town and is itself free from debt. Multiply this town by many thousands of other similar examples and think of the civic value of the club movement.

A mere account of accomplishments cannot bring out the value of such endeavor in growth of public pride, in development of a community spirit, and in power of example to the youth. Nor does the woman's club work by itself: the gradual raising of public opinion

which accompanies the civic activities of the club women everywhere may well be termed its greatest asset. Activities, which attract the interest of the mother of a family, with a full consideration of the conditions which aroused them and the results expected, form the topics of daily conversation in the family. Father, mother and children become enthusiastic over the subject and interest spreads to neighbors, friends, men's clubs and street corners until that which was begun timidly and with serious apprehension at a club meeting ends in a community interest sufficient to revolutionize public opinion and to bring about real reform. Nor are these activities confined to one state: every state in the Union feels and knows and is benefited by the club and federation interest in civic affairs. Each state has its civic club or its civic department of the cultural club and an awakening civic consciousness is everywhere state-wide because of these clubs. A few examples, taken at random from different states, may serve to show the varied and useful directions in which the woman's club is working for civic betterment. Nor will these examples be unusual ones or even the best in many instances: the selection is as fair as can be made showing simply the natural trend of the club movement in all things useful and beneficial to the community.

In the state of Kentucky there is a civic league of women, fifty in number, in an active little town of about four thousand people. This league has recently taken an unsightly corner lot, adjacent to the town water supply, and made of it a lovely little park. They have taken also an active interest in the public schools and, by securing the registration of women for the school election, were instrumental in materially improving the personnel of the school board. They have made great progress in inducing the grocers to remove the foodstuffs from the sidewalks; they have inspected and censored two motion picture theatres; they have inaugurated an annual clean-up day, organized two patrols of boy scouts and installed a traveling library.

In Lexington in this same state there exists the finest example America possesses of a neighborhood school, a school and community house and social center combined. This school owes its existence almost entirely to the activities of women.

A Connecticut club during the past year laid over two thousand feet of sidewalk, beautified the grounds about the railroad station,

gave prizes for interior and exterior improvement of schoolhouses, and for excellence in school garden contests.

One southern club set out in a single year a beautiful avenue of five hundred catalpa trees; another cared for the hitherto neglected cemetery, righting up headstones, mowing vacant lots, building fences and erecting a handsome gateway and planting more than a hundred shade trees; another maintains a branch of the public library in the poorer district of the town, furnishing all books and paying for the services of a librarian and for all incidental expenses.

The last named club maintains also a reading-room in one of the fire stations and keeps in circulation in the schools and smaller towns of the county several traveling libraries. It has given prizes to the girls of the local schools; has been instrumental in bringing about a saner celebration of the Fourth of July, Hallowe'en and Christmas; has assisted the local men's club in bringing to the town a seven days' Chautauqua, and has aided the mayor and a local fraternal organization in filling the empty Christmas stockings of several hundred little children.

In New Mexico there is a club of about thirty-five members which has succeeded in raising the money to build and equip, without the aid of any great philanthropist, a ten thousand dollar library which has a collection of about four thousand volumes, maintains a children's room with story-telling hours for the little children. It also has charge of the public plaza and cemetery and has transformed the latter place from a desolate and forsaken spot to a place of beauty with trees, flowers, grasses and neatly kept walks and drives.

A club in Oregon has obtained a forty-acre park site and preserved the old Fort Dalles blockhouse, used during the Indian wars. In South Dakota we find a club in Ft. Pierre which has erected a public drinking fountain at a cost of several hundred dollars. In Arizona we find manual training in the public schools of one city due solely to the efforts of a club of women who raised the necessary funds and secured the necessary legislation. Colorado boasts of a club of women who appealed in vain to the city council but, not deterred by this refusal on the part of the city fathers, took their own school-boy sons on Saturday and cleaned up the town themselves. Illinois, even outside of her large towns, could tell some wonderful stories of accomplishment, not the least of which

is the circulation of plans, drawn by experts, which have been loaned not only in the state but to the reading public of the country, in order that back yards may be made beautiful by inexpensive but careful planting. Who does not know of the work of the New Orleans club women in behalf of a better sewerage and drainage system; or of the effort of the women in Maryland to convince the Baltimore merchants that smoke is an evidence of wastefulness rather than thrift, and who taught them "to burn their smoke rather than their money?" The teaching of thrift to the children of the public schools in Massachusetts belongs to the credit of the club women: it was reported that during a single year forty clubs reported the saving of over \$300,000 by the school children of that state. If, instead of hundreds of towns where civic work has been accomplished by club women, Missouri had but the one example of Kirksville, the club movement would have made a most valuable contribution to civic work in that state. There is scarcely a corner in that city that does not bear testimony by its cleanliness or beauty to the work of the club women.

From several states came reports of bathhouses, built and maintained by club women; of schoolhouses opened as social centers; of incinerators installed and a new system of garbage and waste collection; of municipal abattoirs and better state inspection; of cleaner bakeries; of better milk and water supplies; of women police officers on duty; of free medical dispensaries and clinics; of rest rooms by the hundreds. When we ask the reason for these things, the answer is unanimously, "The woman's club did it."

Perhaps the civic undertaking which will, when completed, attract to itself more comment than any other is the beautifying of the proposed Lincoln Highway which will stretch across our great country from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In her report of the Lincoln Way Tree Committee of the General Federation, made to the Chicago Convention the chairman says:

The Lincoln Way Tree Committee is already working on a comprehensive planting plan for the entire distance from ocean to ocean with the purpose of having each state adopt a style of gardening of its own as different as possible from every other state. The coöperation of governors, and mayors of towns through which the highway passes, of landscape gardeners and horticulturists in state universities, of state and city foresters, has already been asked and in many cases promised.

In the work of planting the Lincoln Way we may weave garlands of sentiment, but a well-planted highway across our continent is a very practical undertaking which interests and benefits all of our people socially, educationally and economically.

It offers a new medium of travel which will necessarily make for prosperity, inspire love of country and a patriotic desire to see America first; while at the same time it will prove an irresistible invitation to travelers from foreign lands.

In addition to the Lincoln Way, we are undertaking to plant thousands of miles of main roads which will connect with the Lincoln Way. One of these starting from Chattanooga will pass Lincoln's birthplace, and, dividing in Kentucky, one branch will pass McKinley's home, while the other courses northward to join the Lincoln Highway in Indiana.

All clubs are asked to cooperate with the school teachers to secure the participation of school children in this work for better roads and a more beautiful America.

Summing up the civic activities of American club women, Miss Zona Gale, recent chairman of the Department of Civics in the General Federation, says:

The actual status of civic work being done by the federated clubs of the United States is sketched in the accompanying outline, furnished by the civic chairman of the various states.

It will be seen that the growth in civic work among clubs consists:

1. In the introduction of civic departments in department clubs.
2. In the study of civic and social conditions by study clubs.
3. In the organization of workers for actual civic advance.

And of the three, the second and third greatly predominate.

It is also observable that in the third activity, the work proceeds along the same lines. The initial steps usually include "clean-up" days, the buying of trash baskets, prizes for back-yard improvement, the attacking of billboards; all admirable. Next comes constructive work in beautifying; the planting of small open squares, the hope of a little park, the placing of seats in sightly places. This leads naturally to work for sanitation, the clearing of alleys, garbage collection, fly campaigns, bubble fountains, abolishing the exposure of food on sidewalks, of street-sweeping during traffic hours and without the use of the hose, medical inspection of school children, the tuberculin testing of cattle, the anti-tuberculosis work in various forms. Then inevitably comes the still more human element, the element constructive as well as preventive: playgrounds, domestic science and manual training, a gymnasium for the schools, the development of recreational facilities, attention to motion pictures, investigation of the treatment of juvenile offenders, the condition of local gaols and lock-ups, of child labor, of factory and shop conditions in general—hours, sanitation, wages, and so, gradually to the whole underlying industrial situation, and to the economic conditions which have begotten it.

Most of the civic clubs are working in the earlier stages. Indeed, when they get to the later stages, they are likely to dissolve and to enter the field from another direction. But no civic club can wish for its members anything better than so to educate them that they will pass from the initial stages of civic effort on to the direct work from whose growing area the call for workers sounds so clear.

Meanwhile, from these reports, and from the answers to the questions which accompanied the requests for them, and above all from the hundreds of letters which have passed through the department in those two years, one fact seems to me to stand out most clearly:

That if our actual organization is to keep pace with our dream, then we must realize that no dream can continue indefinitely on volunteer work alone.

The truth is that the civic department has now outlived its period of amateur effort, and that the work has grown too large for the hands of the volunteers who are attempting to carry it. If we are to get, not our maximum, but even a fair proportion of efficiency from the splendid unselfish desire now awake and alive in club women who are civic workers, then we must introduce into our work that to which every volunteer work must grow: The coöperation of trained and paid organizers.

To illustrate: In Wisconsin, there have been sometimes a dozen requests to the State Civic Committee for the chairman to go to towns to organize for civic study and civic work. No woman, unless she give her whole time to the work, can carry on activity such as this. Not only so, but there is an enormous borderland of towns not yet at the point of asking for help, to which somebody should go to initiate civic work, and create the demand for further coöperation from outside. And this should be done systematically, county by county in each state, until not a single community is left in any state whose members have not had a direct chance to come into the great new current of social consciousness which is pouring round the world.

Concretely: The recommendation of the chairman of this department would be for the appointment, by the General Federation Board, of a paid civic organizer, whose duty shall be to go from state to state, where the need is shown by these and later reports to be the greatest, and to coöperate with the civic chairman of these states in the organization into civic clubs and civic departments of the many whose civic sense is awake, but who need direction as to how to function. Best of all, such an organizer would organize not only clubs but whole communities into self-conscious bodies, meeting for the transaction of their own social business.

There is the most urgent and immediate need for this sort of work; for someone who understands the immense educational value of such work as she can direct the clubs and communities to undertake; both in program planning and in the adoption of definite activities—someone who sees what the social awakening means. Never was the need of an endowment fund better exemplified than in the sharp need for the immediate appointment by the board of such an office, and in the certainty that, unless this is done, precious time and willing impulse are going to be irreparably lost to us.

Eventually, every state must have such a paid organizer, a civic secretary, if you like, supported by the state. Eventually, every town must have, supported by the town, such a paid civic worker, a municipal secretary, if you like, a director of the great uncoordinated civic impulse stirring alive in town, large and small, and at last understanding that a civic secretary, a secretary of social work and recreational life, is just as vital as an inspector of weights and measures, of buildings, of sidewalks themselves.

Such are the dreams; such are the aspirations; and such are the accomplishments of the women's clubs of America in regard to civic betterment.